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Using AI to Improve Public Relations: Ethical and Strategic Considerations

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Abstract

This article explores the transformative impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on public relations (PR), examining its historical roots, its contemporary resurgence and its multifaceted role. Highlighting the recent AI boom driven by factors such as the rise of Big Data, the article addresses ethical concerns (data privacy, bias) and challenges strategy (job cuts, transparency) in AI-based public relations and focusing on improving performance and efficiency, we go deep into the role of AI in media monitoring, content creation, audience targeting and campaign measurement. With a focus on transparency, bias mitigation, and responsible data use, this article provides insights for practitioners, scholars, and organizations navigating the landscape. The public relations scene is growing. The case studies illustrate the transformative impact of AI and advocate for a balanced approach that leverages the benefits of AI while taking into account ethical and strategic considerations.

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A. Introduction:

Artificial intelligence (AI) has become a central force in technological advancement, penetrating many different aspects of our daily lives. Its influence is evident in innovations like self-driving cars and virtual personal assistants like Siri and Alexa, signaling transformational change. Among the fields affected by AI, public relations (PR) is undergoing a profound paradigm shift.

At its core, AI represents the simulation of human thinking and problem solving using software and algorithms. Although recent attention has focused on AI, its historical roots lie in ancient civilizations, where myths and stories from cultures such as Greece, Egypt, and China describes machines that imitate human cognition. The concept of creating remarkable artificial life is a long-standing theme, evident in Jewish tradition and literature, represented by the mythical Golem formed from clay. Mary Shelley's 19th-century novel "Frankenstein" explores the ethical implications of creating sentient beings through scientific experimentation. However, it was not until after World War II that computer technology capable of programming complex tasks emerged (Buchanan, 2005).

The term "artificial intelligence" itself was officially coined in 1956, marking a pivotal moment when the first working AI program was demonstrated (Nilsson, 2010). The contemporary resurgence of AI, often referred to as the "AI boom", is driven by a combination of factors such as the exponential growth of Big Data, access to increased AI technology and the emergence of user-friendly AI techniques. This resurgence has attracted the attention of various fields, including public relations and marketing, leading to awareness of AI's significant potential.

However, this rise has raised major concerns, from ethical considerations to job cuts, transparency and the broader social impact of AI-powered PR strategies. Public relations, as a discipline, depends heavily on data and communication.

It draws on a variety of sources such as consumer research, market analysis, customer feedback and competitive information to shape communication and distribution strategies. AI, with its data analytics, natural language processing, and automation capabilities, has become indispensable in these efforts. Whether through chatbots answering customer questions or sentiment analysis of social media data, AI has expanded its reach across the public relations landscape, opening up possibilities yet ever had.

While the potential benefits of AI in public relations are remarkable, challenges stick around. Ethical considerations, including data privacy, algorithmic bias, and responsible use of technology, accompany the integration of AI into public relations. Additionally, strategic questions arise about

how organizations should adapt to the changing public relations landscape in an AI-driven world. This article aims to increase the integration of AI in public relations and marketing, addressing the ethical and strategic aspects of this transformation. It seeks to explore the multifaceted role of AI in shaping the public relations landscape, assessing how it can improve, challenge or reshape traditional public relations practices. The aim is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the potential benefits and ethical and strategic considerations where AI and PR intersect, providing insight and guidance for practitioners, Scholars and organizations navigate public relations in the changing landscape of an AI-driven world.

B. How AI is Being Used in PR Today:

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has catalyzed a revolution in various industries, reshaping the way we consume and create content. This transformative impact extends to the field of Public Relations (PR), where AI tools are increasingly integrated into the profession. AI's Influence in Media and Marketing (Guarneri, 2023) is a testament to the rapid transformation of the media landscape. Major media outlets like [BuzzFeed](#) are actively incorporating AI into their core operations, utilizing it to generate content such as quizzes. This shift towards AI-generated content is challenging traditional methods and redefining the content creation process. Notably, the McKinsey Global Institute predicts that marketing and sales are the two sectors most likely to be deeply impacted by AI. Corporations like McDonald's and Starbucks are already demonstrating the transformative power of AI. Starbucks has integrated AI to enhance customer experiences and boost profitability. These case studies illustrate how AI is redefining the customer-client interaction and the way businesses operate (Forbes, 2023).

AI's Role in PR (White, 2023) extends beyond content creation to impact various facets of the profession. It can automate repetitive tasks, allowing PR teams more time for strategic initiatives. However, as AI's influence in PR continues to grow, ethical considerations and potential pitfalls emerge. White (2023) highlights the challenges that arise when AI tools are misused to cut corners, leading to errors and inaccuracies in content. These errors can significantly damage a brand's reputation, as exemplified by the case of CNET, which was forced to issue major corrections due to AI-generated inaccuracies in its news writing.

Hence it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of AI tools. While AI can automate tasks and generate content, it cannot entirely replicate the nuanced, human-centered approach that PR professionals bring to the field (White, 2023). The case of OpenAI's ChatGPT underscores the potential for AI to generate content that is not always appropriate or accurate. Moreover, AI tools

require responsible usage and oversight to ensure that they enhance, rather than undermine, the quality and integrity of PR practice.

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into the field of Public Relations (PR) has ushered in a new era of efficiency and effectiveness. AI is being harnessed in PR in diverse ways, each contributing to the profession's evolution and effectiveness.

a. Media Monitoring and Analysis:

One of the most notable applications of AI in PR is in media monitoring and analysis. AI-powered tools have the capability to process and analyze vast quantities of media coverage, a task that would be daunting for PR professionals to undertake manually. These tools excel in recognizing patterns, identifying trends, and extracting valuable insights from the deluge of media data. For example, Meltwater, a global media intelligence company, utilizes AI to monitor and analyze vast volumes of media coverage. Their AI system scans millions of news articles, blogs, social media posts, and other online content to track brand mentions, monitor sentiment, and identify emerging trends. As a result, PR practitioners can stay ahead of the curve, gaining a deeper understanding of public sentiment, market trends, and emerging issues. By harnessing AI in media monitoring and analysis, PR professionals can better anticipate and respond to evolving narratives.

b. Content Generation

AI is not confined to analytical tasks; it is also a valuable asset in content generation. PR professionals can employ AI-powered tools to produce a wide array of content, including press releases, blog posts, and social media updates. AI-generated content can be refined to align with brand messaging and objectives, freeing PR practitioners from the drudgery of routine writing tasks. Wordsmith, developed by Automated Insights, is an AI-powered platform that automates content generation. The Associated Press (AP) utilises Wordsmith to produce thousands of earnings reports, sports recaps, and other data-driven articles. In PR, this technology can be harnessed to generate press releases, reports, and blog posts efficiently. This enables them to allocate more time and energy to strategic endeavours, such as devising creative PR campaigns and engaging with stakeholders.

c. Audience Targeting and Segmentation

AI's role in audience targeting and segmentation cannot be overstated. PR professionals can leverage AI to identify and categorise target audiences with remarkable precision. AI algorithms analyse a myriad of data points to pinpoint audience characteristics, behaviours, and preferences.

For instance, Netflix, a global streaming giant, employs AI topersonalisee content recommendations for its users. The company's algorithmsanalysee userbehaviourr, viewing history, and preferences to offer tailored content suggestions. This approach has led to an increase in user engagement and satisfaction. In the PR realm, a fashion brand, Balenciaga, utilised AI-driven audience segmentation to delivecustomiseded influencer outreach campaigns. Banalysingng social media data anbehaviouror, they identified micro-influencers who had a genuine interest in their products, resulting in more authentic and effective collaborations. With this data-driven approach, PR practitioners can craft tailored and relevant messaging, ensuring their communications resonate with the intended recipients. The result is an enhanced ability to connect with audiences on a personal level, fostering deeper engagement and trust.

d. Campaign Measurement and Evaluation

In the realm of campaign measurement and evaluation, AI is a game-changer. AI-powered tools offer a systematic and data-driven approach to assessing the performance of PR campaigns. These tools can provide insights into which strategies are effective and which ones need adjustment. By leveraging AI for campaign evaluation, PR professionals gain the advantage of real-time feedback and a deeper understanding of how their efforts are translating into tangible outcomes. IBM's Watson Analytics is an AI-powered platform that provides advanced data analytics and insights. IBM used Watson Analytics to evaluate the success of its "Call for Code" global initiative, aimed at solving pressing societal challenges through technology. The AI platform processed vast amounts of data related to participant engagement, impact metrics, and media coverage. The PR team gained valuable insights into the campaign's effectiveness, enabling them to refine strategies, focus on high-impact regions, and showcase the initiative's accomplishments. This data-driven approach enhances the ability to refine strategies, optimise resources, and ensure that PR campaigns align with organisationalrecognised goals.

C. Ethical and Strategic Considerations of Using AI in PR

C.a. Ethical Considerations

C.a.i. Transparency. Transparency is paramount in the integration of AI into PR practices. PR professionals should openly disclose instances where AI, whether through chatbots or content generation, is engaged in interactions with audiences. This commitment to transparency not only fosters trust but also allows individuals to differentiate between human and AI-driven interactions (Comcowich, 2020).

The UK Chartered Institute of Public Relations and the Canadian Public Relations Society have recognised the importance of transparency. Their joint Ethics Guide to Artificial Intelligence in PR underlines the role of communication professionals in addressing ethical challenges and risks tied to AI implementation (Comcowich, 2020).

C.a.ii. Bias. The presence of inherent biases within AI systems raises ethical concerns. PR professionals must remain vigilant about potential biases embedded in the training data of AI algorithms. These biases can perpetuate stereotypes, lead to discriminatory decision-making, and compromise diverse representation. It is incumbent upon PR practitioners to scrutinise training data and implement measures to mitigate bias in AI systems (Hameedi, 2023).

The AI industry's rapid expansion and its pervasive role across sectors, including PR, necessitate professionals to critically examine the ethical implications of biassed algorithms. The Ethics Guide emphasises the role of PR professionals in AI teams from the outset, ensuring ethical questions are posed that technical specialists might overlook (Comcowich, 2020).

C.a.iii. Privacy. The data-intensive nature of AI gives rise to concerns about privacy. PR professionals leveraging AI tools must adhere to data protection regulations, maintaining robust security measures in data handling. Transparent practices, encrypted storage, and secure data transfer are crucial elements in protecting the privacy and integrity of individuals and organisations (Hameedi, 2023).

C.b. Strategic Considerations

C.b.i. ROI (Return on Investment). Evaluating the return on investment (ROI) when investing in AI-powered tools is crucial for PR professionals. While AI offers transformative capabilities, it is imperative to ensure that the benefits derived from AI implementation outweigh the associated costs. This assessment becomes pivotal for strategic decision-making and resource allocation (Guarneri, 2023).

Case studies demonstrate the successful integration of AI by companies like McDonald's and Starbucks. Their strategic use of AI in automated drive-throughs and customer experience enhancement illustrates the potential ROI when AI is strategically applied to PR efforts (Guarneri, 2023). The drive-thru model, celebrated for its efficiency, has become even more integral, accounting for a substantial 70% of sales in key markets since March 2020. This surge in drive-thru sales has not only weathered the storm of the pandemic but has

persistently remained elevated, surpassing pre-pandemic levels, as attested by Chris Kempczinski, McDonald's President and CEO, during the Q3 2021 earnings call (Owen, 2022). This resilience highlights the adaptability and success of McDonald's in navigating the changing dynamics of the fast-food industry using AI.

C.b.ii. Integration. The successful integration of AI-powered tools into existing PR workflows is paramount. Although challenging, this integration ensures that AI is used effectively to enhance PR practices. Whether automating routine tasks or analyzing vast amounts of data, the seamless integration of AI into PR workflows maximizes its strategic value (PR and AI: 21 Ways Artificial Intelligence is Changing the PR Game, 2023).

PR agencies adopting tools like Wordsmith exemplify successful integration. The use of AI for personalized press releases showcases how AI tools can be seamlessly incorporated into existing PR processes, providing customized and relevant content at scale.

C.b.iii. Upskilling. As AI becomes integral to PR practices, professionals must proactively upskill themselves. This involves gaining proficiency in various AI tools, understanding their applications, and acquiring the knowledge needed to achieve specific PR goals. The upskilling process ensures that PR professionals can harness the full potential of AI for strategic PR outcomes.

Industry insights suggest that PR leaders play a pivotal role in promoting responsible AI adoption through education, experimentation, and skill development (Ewing, 2023). The strategic upskilling of PR professionals aligns with the evolving landscape, empowering them to utilize AI effectively while preserving the human touch in communication.

D. Best Practices for Using AI in PR in a Responsible and Ethical Manner

As Public Relations (PR) professionals embrace the transformative power of Artificial Intelligence (AI), it becomes imperative to adopt best practices that ensure responsible and ethical use of this technology. The following guidelines offer a roadmap for PR practitioners to navigate the ethical considerations associated with AI integration.

D.a. Transparency is Paramount

Be transparent about the use of AI in PR activities. Disclose to audiences when they are interacting with AI-powered chatbots or consuming AI-generated content. Transparency builds trust and credibility. In a case study presented by Comcowich (2020), the UK Chartered Institute of Public Relations and the Canadian Public Relations Society prepared an Ethics Guide to Artificial Intelligence in PR. This guide emphasizes the importance of ethical and reputational guardianship

at every stage of AI development, making transparency a foundational principle (Comcowich, 2020).

D.b. Guard Against Bias

Be aware of the potential for bias in AI systems and take proactive steps to mitigate it. In the world of AI-powered PR, biased algorithms can lead to unfair or discriminatory decisions. Wordsmith, an AI-powered natural language generation tool, offers a case study illustrating the importance of addressing bias. For instance, a PR Newswire adopted Wordsmith to create personalized press releases for clients, but it required careful oversight to ensure the generated content did not inadvertently perpetuate biases.

D.c. Responsible Data Collection and Usage

Ensure responsible and ethical collection and usage of data in AI-driven PR activities. AI systems rely on vast amounts of data, raising concerns about privacy. The case study of AI adoption in PR by McDonald's offers insights into responsible data usage. By leveraging AI in drive-thru services, McDonald's has not only enhanced customer experience but has also strategically utilized data to optimize operations (Owen, 2022).

D.d. Consider ROI Carefully

PR professionals need to carefully consider the Return on Investment (ROI) of investing in AI-powered tools. In the context of AI-driven PR, a case study from the USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations and WE Communications emphasizes the strategic role of PR leaders. A recent survey conducted by WE Communications and the USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations sheds light on the perceptions of 400 senior communications professionals regarding the burgeoning interest in generative AI. Despite 80% acknowledging the significance of AI for the future of the industry, a mere 16% consider themselves "extremely knowledgeable" about AI applications. The survey underscores the need for communications leaders to bridge this knowledge gap through enhanced education, experimentation, and dedicated skill development. The report, titled "Fascinated and Frightened: A Look at How Communications Professionals Are Viewing the AI Opportunity Ahead," outlines key findings, including challenges to adoption, immediate opportunities for leveraging generative AI, and a recommended path forward. The insights collectively emphasize the pivotal role of communications leaders in guiding the purposeful, strategic, and ethical use of AI in the field (Waggener Edstrom Worldwide, Inc., n.d.).

The study found that communicators are increasingly using AI technologies for various tasks, including content creation, background research, data analysis, language translation, and audience insights. However, to ensure ethical and responsible AI use, careful consideration of the ROI is essential (Ewing, 2023).

D.e. Integration with Existing Workflows

Integrate AI-powered tools seamlessly with existing PR workflows and processes. The successful integration of AI into PR practices requires a strategic approach. Referring to the McDonald's case study, the drive-thru model's evolution exemplifies the seamless integration of AI into established operations. This integration has allowed McDonald's to adapt to changing market dynamics and consumer preferences (Owen, 2022).

D.f. Continuous Upskilling

Upskill PR professionals to effectively use AI-powered tools by providing training and educational programs. AI technologies evolve rapidly, demanding continuous learning. The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), as the largest professional organization for public relations practitioners globally, has prioritized addressing the ethical implications of artificial intelligence (AI). Launching the AI Ethics Initiative in 2018, PRSA aims to educate and inform PR professionals about the potential benefits and risks of AI while assisting in the development of ethical guidelines for its use. Through a series of well-attended webinars and seminars featuring leading AI experts, PRSA provides a platform for global PR professionals to gain insights into the ethical considerations surrounding AI. The organization's commitment is further demonstrated by the publication of resources, including a white paper, a guide on developing ethical AI policies, and a case study illustrating the use of AI in a PR campaign. PRSA's comprehensive approach through the AI Ethics Initiative exemplifies the industry's dedication to educating professionals and fostering ethical awareness within the PR community, positioning itself as a significant contributor to addressing AI's ethical challenges. The case study of the PR industry association organizing webinars and seminars on AI ethics demonstrates the industry's commitment to educating professionals and fostering ethical awareness within the PR community.

E. Conclusion

In short, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into public relations (PR) represents a landmark change with both promising benefits and complex challenges. As AI becomes increasingly ingrained in public relations practice, the ethical and strategic considerations surrounding its implementation cannot be overstated. The evolution of AI in public relations, from media monitoring and content creation to audience targeting and campaign evaluation, highlights its potential to revolutionize the profession. At the ethical level, transparency seems to be a fundamental principle. PR professionals should openly disclose AI involvement in interactions and content creation, thereby fostering trust and allowing audiences to differentiate between human-driven and AI driven. Additionally, it is essential to combat bias in AI algorithms to avoid perpetuating stereotypes and discriminatory decision making. Privacy concerns require responsible data handling practices, regulating the use of AI with strict data protection regulations. Strategically, a thorough assessment of return on investment (ROI) is essential. Public relations practitioners must weigh the benefits of implementing AI against the associated costs, ensuring that the strategic value derived from AI is consistent with its integration. Successful integration involves seamlessly incorporating AI tools into existing workflows, exemplified by industry cases such as Wordsmith in content creation and McDonald's in operations optimization. Continuous development of public relations professionals is imperative to harness the full potential of AI while maintaining a human-centered approach to defining effective public relations.

Industry organizations and associations play an important role in providing training, resources, and guidance on ethics, as evidenced by initiatives such as the Public Affairs Association's AI Ethics Initiative in the United States. In the face of a changing public relations landscape in an AI-driven world, practitioners, scholars and organizations must remain vigilant and adopt best practices to ensure the use of AI responsibly and ethically. This research aims to provide stakeholders with comprehensive information, promoting the balanced integration of AI into public relations activities to improve efficiency while respecting ethical standards. As AI continues to shape the future of public relations, a conscious and ethical approach is paramount to realizing its full potential in driving communication strategies and engagement by stakeholders.

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